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2 **BEFORE THE STATE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORITY**
3 **STATE OF NEVADA**

4 In Re:
5 Nevada Connections Academy Notice of
6 Closure or Possible Board Reconstitution
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8 **DECLARATION OF TESSA RIVERA**

9 I, Tessa Rivera, hereby declare under penalty of perjury as follows:

10 1. I am a Nevada Connections Academy (“NCA”) Board member. I make this
11 declaration in support of NCA relative to closure proceedings before the State Public Charter
12 School Authority held on May 25, 26, and 27, 2017, and continued to an unspecified date in
13 2017.
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15 2. The matters set forth in this declaration are based on my own personal knowledge.
16 If called upon to testify, I am competent to testify to the matters set forth herein.
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18 3. I have served on the NCA Board of Directors since 2015 as the Education Sector
19 Representative. I am currently the Dean of students at Bishop Gorman High School in Las
20 Vegas. 2017 marks my 17th year in education, with 10 years of public school experience. I
21 earned my master’s degree in Educational Counseling, and am currently a doctoral candidate,
22 researching the impact of organizational leadership on new teacher attrition rates throughout the
23 United States.

24 4. As an NCA Board member, I attend monthly meetings with the board and make
25 sure I am up to speed about the school’s progress. We, as a board, provide feedback and offer an
26 outsider’s perspective on what is going on with school. We complete surveys to provide
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1 feedback to the school regarding where the school should be headed, based on, in my case, my
2 many years of experience in education.

3 5. Part of our role as a board is to hold school administrators accountable—making
4 sure that Steve Werlein and other school personnel are ensuring that the school meets
5 benchmarks, and making sure that school personnel themselves are meeting benchmarks—all of
6 which we evaluate in closed sessions. Regarding NCA’s graduation rate, board members hold
7 collaborative discussions during our monthly meetings about ideas for improving the grad rate—
8 we agree on what we need to see happen and all board members have agreed upon and voted to
9 approve the most recent “cure” proposal as submitted to the Authority, and we then followed up
10 with school administrators to find out how implementation is going and making sure progress is
11 made. The board sets expectations that the school must meet in terms of graduation goals, with
12 the understanding that, logically, the school will not achieve a graduation rate as high as that of
13 traditional school based on the types of students who enroll—the school and the state must allow
14 these students time to catch up to their peers in traditional schools.
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17 6. I have been concerned about the graduation rate -- and we have been diligently
18 working to implement our Graduation Rate Improvement Plan presented to the Authority Board
19 in May 2016. I also have significant concerns about the time and money that must be funneled
20 toward closure proceedings before the State Public Charter School Authority (“SPCSA”), and
21 the refusal of Authority Staff to work with us and allow an open discussion between board
22 members and the Authority about managing expectations to meet in the middle – which I believe
23 could have easily resolved this issue.
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25 7. With that mindset, I personally have previously reached out to several Authority
26 board members with the hope of starting an open conversation that might yield a mutual
27 resolution, and I know several of my fellow NCA board members have done the same. I heard
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1 back from one member of the Authority, which I appreciated, but I do wish that more Authority
2 board members would listen and respond to the NCA board's attempts to reach out. Having a
3 conversation about the types of underrepresented students NCA serves and the success from
4 NCA's attempts to comply with the Authority's requests regarding measures to increase its
5 graduation rate would likely have prevented the need for a hearing.
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7 8. NCA's student population is not similarly-situated to other schools in Nevada,
8 and should not be treated as such. For example, whereas Bishop Gorman might have one or two
9 credit-deficient students per class, NCA has many severely credit-deficient students enrolling
10 throughout the school year. As an educator, I understand that it is ethically and legally wrong to
11 turn these students away—public education is meant to serve everyone, and I am troubled that
12 the Authority Staff would attempt to shut down a school for essentially adhering to this ethical
13 and legal code without any consideration of other measures of school performance, such as
14 testing. I am aware that other charter schools have refused to admit credit-deficient students,
15 thereby manipulating graduation rate statistics across the state, and setting unrealistic
16 expectations for those schools who do adhere to their ethical responsibility. It is also NCA's
17 ethical responsibility to be persistent to ensure that students have options to try to catch up on
18 credits—NCA is meeting that goal by ensuring that students are followed closely by teachers and
19 counselors, and that the school is persistent in keeping students engaged.
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22 9. I have personally been involved in efforts to find new NCA board members, and
23 finding qualified applicants has been a challenge. We recently interviewed one applicant who
24 was knowledgeable about the school and the population it serves, and she has since been
25 approved as a new member. However, other attempts to find board members have not been
26 successful, though the NCA board has reached out to the Authority Staff (who did not respond)
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1 and to the Authority Board Chair (who did respond) for assistance in finding new board
2 members.

3 10. I maintain my hope that we can work collaboratively with the Authority on a
4 solution that allows NCA to continue serving Nevada students who are very much in need of this
5 alternative.

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7 I declare under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of Nevada that the
8 foregoing is true and corrected and was executed this 12th day of June, 2017, in Las Vegas,
9 Nevada.

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14 TESSA RIVERA

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